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ABSTRACT

Across the nation, increasing emphasis is being placed on prevention and early intervention services for children. Changes are reflected in legislative mandates, increased collaboration within and across services delivery systems, and recommended professional practices. This study examines one state's efforts for children in early childhood special education services. Also investigated were: how school psychology services in early childhood settings compare to those provided for the school-age population; how school psychologists are trained to work with young children and their families; and what special challenges school psychologists face when working with this population. For this study, 231 school psychologists responded to a survey which asked about demographics, training, tasks, duties, and challenges in the early childhood population. Results show that a majority of school psychologists provide some early intervention services. Psychologists reported having to depend heavily on in-service training to develop skills relevant to this population. They also recorded that their greatest challenges in working with this population were providing adequate support to other team members, planning intervention programs, and a lack of training in specific intervention strategies. Four tables, comprising over half the document, present results. (Contains 13 references.) (RJM)

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ED 400 478

School Psychology and Early Childhood Services: A Look at What is Happening in One State

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(Supported by Iowa State University and United States Department of Education Grant #HO29F40081)

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Iowa has mandated early childhood special education (ECSE) services beginning at birth since 1975. Across the nation, increasing emphasis is being placed on prevention and early intervention services for children, and the field of ECSE has expanded dramatically in the past decade. Changes are reflected in legislative mandates, increased collaboration within and across services delivery systems, and recommended professional practices (Bailey & Wolery, 1992).

PL 99-457 mandates a focus on the individual needs of young children *and their families*, as well as an orientation toward promoting adaptive functioning *within the community*. This mandate for services to be comprehensive and coordinated makes it clear that services defined within traditional disciplinary boundaries are unlikely to meet current and future needs (Shonkoff & Meisels, 1990). The roles and responsibilities of early intervention personnel are changing accordingly, resulting in significant training needs for individuals from many disciplines, including school psychology (Meisels, Harbin, Modigliani, & Olson, 1988).

School psychology is one of several disciplines recognized by PL 99-457 as an important related service to meet the needs of the early intervention population. Roles typically filled by (Bagnato, Neisworth, Paget, & Kovaleski, 1987) or advocated for (Power, Du Paul, Shapiro, & Parrish, 1995) school psychologists have been described. However, empirical evidence suggests that school psychologists are frequently absent from the team configuration serving young children with special needs (Mowder, Widerstrom, & Sandall, 1990). In addition, the perspectives of school psychologists regarding their roles on early childhood teams appear to differ from those of other early childhood professionals (Widerstrom, Mowder, & Willis, 1989).

The need for specialized training to prepare school psychologists to work effectively with the early childhood population has been highlighted (Barnett, 1986; Bagnato, Neisworth, Paget, & Kovaleski, 1987). But, additional evidence reveals that preservice training programs for professionals delivering related services to special education populations, including school psychologists, provide little opportunity for training about young children and their families (Bailey, Simeonsson, Yoder, & Huntington, 1990). Need for early intervention personnel is further complicated by an inadequate number of trained school psychologists to meet current overall demand (Connolly & Reschly, 1990; Fagan, 1988) and the fact that school psychology training programs around the country are generally unprepared to provide specialized training in early childhood services (Ford, 1992).

Clearly, young children and their families are participating in early intervention services; Iowa reported providing early childhood special education services to more than 6,000 children in each of the last five years. The current study was undertaken to describe how school psychologists are working with this population in Iowa. In addition, we examined how school psychology services in early childhood settings compare to those provided for the school-age population, how school psychologists are trained to work with young children and their families, and what special challenges school psychologists face when working with this population.

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METHODOLOGY

Participants. Participants included school psychologists working in public school settings in the state of Iowa (N=349). Names of individuals were obtained from the Department of Education Iowa School Psychologists Directory -- 1994-95, and surveys were addressed to each. Each intermediate education agency, called Area Education Agencies (AEAs) in Iowa, was contacted informally to enlist support. School psychology supervisors in nine AEAs distributed the surveys at scheduled meetings; all other surveys (six AEAs and the Des Moines School District) were mailed directly to individuals. To maintain confidentiality of responses, all participants, regardless of how they received the survey, were provided an addressed stamped envelope for return directly to the research team.

Follow up efforts included sending a second survey to school psychologists in AEAs with low return rates several weeks after the original had been distributed. Sixty-six percent of the school psychologists (N=231) returned questionnaires; only three forms were not usable.

Procedure. School psychologists were asked to complete a 17-item questionnaire developed for the current study. The survey contained questions regarding demographics and training focused on early childhood services, as well as tasks, duties, and challenges in serving the early childhood population.

RESULTS

Of the 231 school psychologists responding to the survey, 156 indicated they worked on at least one early childhood team. All responses were used to examine questions related to background and training (previous training experiences, as well as perceived need for further training in early childhood). Only responses from those reporting current early childhood assignments were used to examine duties, challenges faced in serving the early childhood population, and perceptions regarding these services.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Empirical data reported here confirm that school psychologists providing early intervention services face the same challenges suggested by numerous writers. A majority of school psychologists responding provide at least some early intervention services. In addition, more than half these school psychologists have only recently (within the last five years) assumed these responsibilities and very few (16%) have served this population longer than 15 years. How rural and urban settings compare on this variable remains a question.

School psychologists serving young children and their families report having to depend heavily on inservice training to develop skills relevant to this population. This is not surprising given the lack of attention currently paid these issues in preservice training programs. However, practicing school psychologists also list further inservice training as their preferred mode for further upgrading their skills. Thus, these findings have implications for both preservice and inservice training programs. Clearly, most (if not all) preservice trainees need increased opportunities to gain experiences with infants and young children and their families. But, what should be the focus of these training activities?

Practicing school psychologists most frequently cited providing adequate support to other team members (37% to families and 32% to teachers and schools), planning intervention programs (32%), and lack of training in specific intervention strategies (29%) as their greatest

challenges when working with early childhood populations. However, these same respondents report making important contributions in these areas, and previous findings suggest these are skills needed from school psychologists (Widerstrom, Mowder, & Willis, 1989; Mowder, Unterspan, Knuter, Goode, & Pedro, 1993).

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DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION*

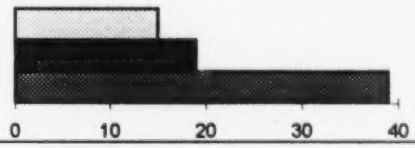
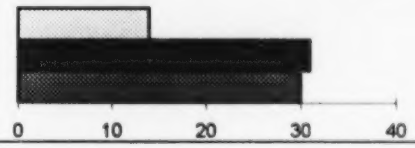
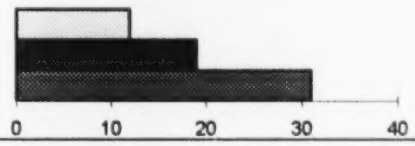
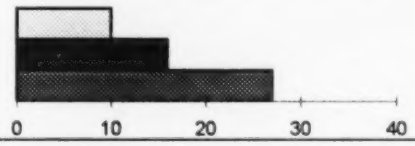
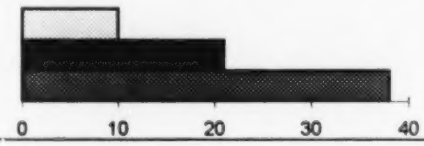
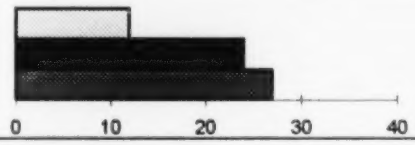
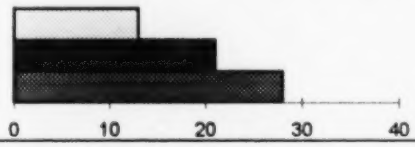
N=231	All Respondents
Average Age	42 years
Gender	
Male	42%
Female	55%
Highest Degree	
Masters	25%
Specialist	35%
Ph.D.	12%
no response	28%
Employed Full Time	94%
Years Employed	
0-5 years	30%
6-15 years	28%
more than 15 years	39%

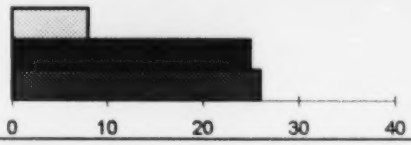
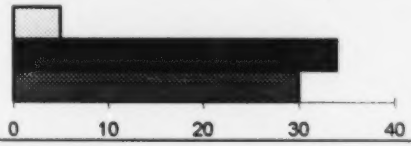
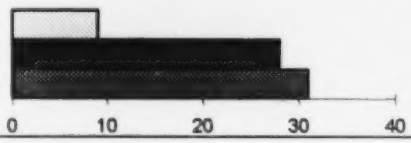
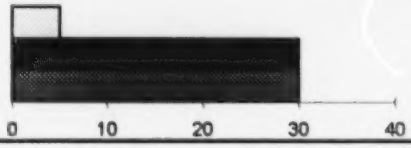
N=155	Respondents Serving Early Childhood Teams
Years Serving Early Childhood (EC)	
0-5 years	47%
6-15 years	33%
more than 15 years	20%
Percent of Time Spent Serving EC	
1-20%	74%
21-33%	12%
34% or more	12%

* Note: all categories do not add up to 100% because of missing data on some items (unless indicated the amount of data missing is not significant).

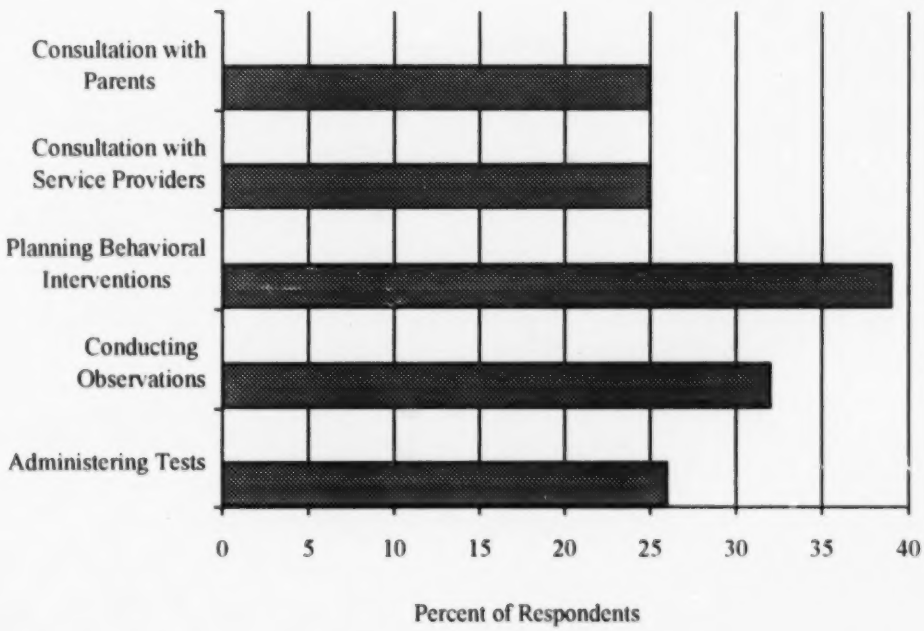
PROFILE OF TIME SPENT ON TASKS WHEN SERVING EARLY CHILDHOOD POPULATION

■ Less ■ Same ▨ More

TASK	MEDIAN % OF TIME	COMPARISON TO SCHOOL-AGE TEAM
Administering Tests	15	
Conducting Observations	10	
Interviewing for Assessment & Intervention	5	
Planning Developmental Interventions	3	
Planning Behavioral Interventions	5	
Consultation with Service Providers	5	
Consultation with Parents	5	
Interpreting Assessment Information	5	

Interpreting Information for Parents	3	
Writing Reports	5	
Attending Team Meetings	5	
Attending IEP/IFSP Meetings	5	

SIGINIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS AS AN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEAM MEMBER



CHALLENGES FACED WHEN WORKING WITH EARLY CHILDHOOD POPULATIONS

AREA STATED	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS
Providing adequate support to families	45
Planning intervention programs	41
Providing adequate support to teachers/schools	41
Lack of training in specific intervention strategies	32
Lack of time to work with team members	36
Coordinating schedules with team members	35
Handling large caseloads	34

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

OPPORTUNITY	PARTICIPATION IN TRAINING (%)	TRAINING RATED MOST HELPFUL
Undergraduate classes	43	
Graduate classes	69	2
Inservice training	68	1
Job-related orientation	57	3
School psychology practicum	41	
Other college practicum	10	
Previous work experience	25	